

Gil Eyal, The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From the Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia, Ann Arbor: University of Minnesota Press, xxiv + 238pp, £XX.XX (\$XX.XX) h/b, £XX.XX (\$XX.XX) p/b.

The disintegration of Czechoslovakia in late 1992 been variously explained as a product of defective federal institutions, the competitive incentives of new party systems, varied national responses to economic reform, and divergent political cultures. Gil Eyal's book brings a fresh perspective, identifying the counter-elites that developed in Czechoslovakia during the late communist period and subsequently came to power in 1989, as the key to the federation's demise. Such new elites, Eyal argues, are best understood in sociological terms as factions of the rising 'new class' of intellectuals and technocrats first identified 'on the road to class power' in Eastern Europe in the 1970s by Szelényi and Konrad.

While the new Czech political elite was formed of ex-dissident anti-politicians and neo-liberal technocrats from the 'grey zone' between the opposition and the communist regime, Slovakia's post-1989 political class was composed of communist-era managers, technocrats with a reform communist background and co-opted nationalist intellectuals. Unlike their isolated Czech counterparts, Slovak counter-elites were, moreover, closely inter-linked and partially integrated with both society and communist power structures. As such, they resembled a traditional 'upper class'. The origins of Czech-Slovak elite divergence, Eyal suggests, lie in contrasting reactions to the collapse of the Prague Spring in 1968 and to the subsequent purges of reformists during the 'normalisation' period.

Eyal examines Czech and Slovak counter-elites' contrasting claims to power and authority, which following Pierre Bourdieu, he sees as mutable and convertible. In the

Czech case, both and after before 1989, Eyal claims, both dissidents and monetarist economists claimed what Foucault termed ‘pastoral power’, seeing themselves as confessors and civic educators for a citizenry morally corrupted by communism. Despite ostensible political differences, Eyal suggests, the two groups’ underlying moralism and anti-communism drew them towards common ‘right-wing’ policies whose essence was ritual renunciation of the communist past. While the dissidents stressed personal integrity and the creation of a authentic social sphere, neo-liberals saw the free market as a natural and morally beneficial order. In Slovakia, by contrast, the emergent ‘upper class’ saw themselves as rooted in a world of social and national interests. They thus interpreted the communist era as part of a shared national past, which could not (and should not) be not rejected at the behest of Prague. In ‘remaking the political field’ in such different ways, the two emergent national elites paved the way for party-political polarisation and the break-up of the federal state. However, Eyal stresses, this was above all the result of the way elites chose to construct their identities and understandings of politics, not of fixed legacies.

Eyal’s central insight – that post-communist elites derived from the counter-elites groupings that emerged after 1968 in response to the failure of reform communism – is compelling. He is also original in stressing that such elites were diverse and extended beyond better known groups such as Charter 77 or deposed reform communist leaders. His stress on the ways such groups *consciously* remade their own identities and definitions of politics is plausible and a useful corrective to the prevalent structuralism in much comparative analysis. However, the book’s ambition outstrips its author’s ability to develop his insights effectively. Firstly, the depth of research and range of sources consulted (heavily biased towards English language material) seem inadequate to explore the complexity of phenomena such

Czechoslovak dissent and the ‘grey zone’. Secondly, his narrow focus on actors’ conceptions of power effectively excludes meaningful consideration of institutions, social and political interests, ideology or indeed concrete issues of transformation. Much of the resultant analysis is thus unconvincing or tendentious. Eyal is, for example, right to see the appeal of the market (for neo-liberals) and civil society (for dissidents) as rooted in a common desire to replace bureaucratic state power with decentralised, autonomous social systems. However, the notion of a Czech dissident-technocrat ‘alliance’, even a short-lived one in 1990-92, is misleading. Almost no dissidents, including those of a right-wing persuasion, joined Klaus’s Civic Democratic Party, the main vehicle for the neo-liberal technocratic elite. Viewed critically, the supposed ‘alliance’ amounted only to the fact that both groups were propelled to power by the Velvet Revolution and shared a commitment to democracy, the market and a pro-Western orientation. This is hardly a ‘coherent ideological strategy’ (p. 160). Neither did it distinguish them, as Eyal supposes, from ex-reform communists, whom he claims – largely on the basis of a reading of 1980s *samizdat* debates on the ‘transfer’ of the Sudeten Germans - had distinct conceptions of politics and power, which made them rivals and even were ‘enemies’ (p. 62). Many ex-reform communists were later Charter 77 signatories. Some became social liberals or conservatives. Non-socialist dissent always contained a range of views not reducible to the composite ‘anti-political’ position sketched here. Moreover, much anti-political thinking simply reflected the impossibility of political action or was abandoned by many dissidents by the late 1980s as repression moderated. Eyal also underestimates and misinterprets Czech neo-liberals and their ‘need’ for an alliance with dissidents. Genuine technical competence coupled with deep-rooted Czech and Slovak respect for the ‘expert’ (*odborník*)– both later developed by Klaus’s party into a broader

ideology of political professionalism— was legitimacy enough. Eyal’s claim of a shared neo-liberal and ex-dissident vision to marketisation and decommunisation as acts of civic education and ritual purification is similarly unconvincing. Despite paying lip service to the need for cultural change, the Czech Right’s underlying view was always that the good sense of Czechs had survived communism intact. Institutional change, which would change behaviour by changing incentives would therefore suffice. As Kieran Williams’ research has demonstrated, lustration was, in fact, a response to concerns about threats to democracy from ‘old structures’ and an attempt to tame grassroots Czech anti-communism through legality and due process. Finally, the contrast between Czech and Slovak elites is perhaps overstated. As in Slovakia, communist-era economic managers in the Czech Republic were an important part of the new power elite. Czech dissident historians, like their Slovak equivalents, focused on the nation, not merely reassessing of relations with the Sudeten Germans. Correspondingly, although Slovakia had few dissidents in the Czech sense, it possessed a significant (if isolated) liberal counter-elite in ‘islands of positive deviance’ that formed *within* many official organisations in the late 1980s.

The Origins of Postcommunist Elites offers a perplexing combination of compelling, original insight and contrived and unconvincing case analysis. It is, nevertheless, an intellectually significant book, whose claim to address wider questions of power should be taken seriously. As such, it merits a wide, but critical, readership.

Sean Hanley

UCL